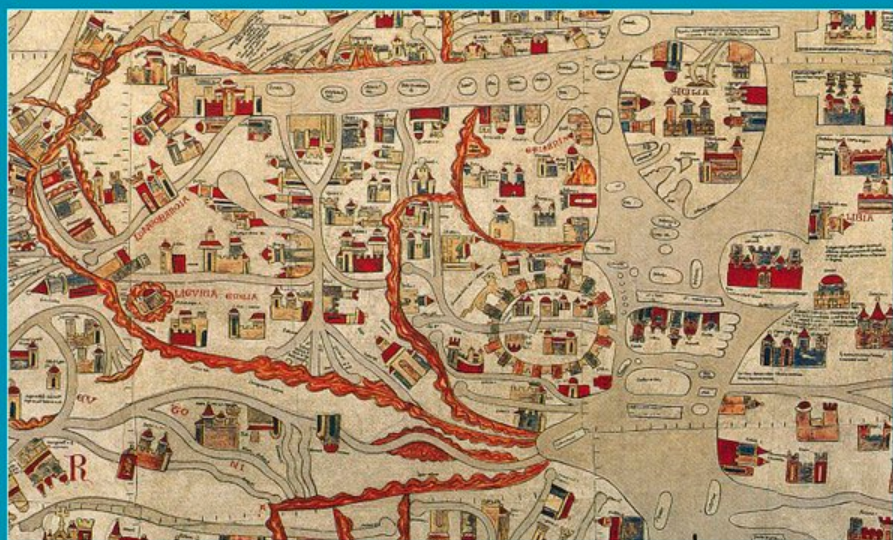


# Queering the Medieval Mediterranean

Transcultural Sea of Sex, Gender,  
Identity, and Culture

Edited by

*Felipe E. Rojas and Peter E. Thompson*



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## Queering the Medieval Mediterranean

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Felipe E. Rojas and Peter E. Thompson



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extensively on the Spanish Golden Age actor Juan Rana, having published various articles on this actor as well as *The Triumphant Juan Rana: A Gay Actor in Spanish Golden Age Theater* (2006), and *The Outrageous Entremeses of Juan Rana: An Annotated and Bilingual Selection of Plays Written for this Spanish Golden Age Actor* (2009).

travails of the Jewish people in the history of the Great Sea, for example, and we hope other volumes will cover these histories.<sup>3</sup>

Also fundamental to the focus of this collection is the employment of two modern theoretical tools in the overall analysis of the medieval Mediterranean: queer theory and transcultural theory. Both are extremely well suited and applicable to the study of the medieval Mediterranean. It is therefore important to outline them here. But before examining queer theory, we must first outline our understanding of the term “queer.”

Scholars and activists reclaimed the term “queer” in the late 1980s, a phrase previously used pejoratively against people having same-sex relationships and desires. Its reclamation was seen as a means to reject outmoded binary gender identities (both heterosexual and homosexual) and to broaden and adopt a more ambiguous term, eliminating the restrictiveness of the heterosexual/homosexual binary worldview:

Ostensibly queer is itself an umbrella term, which permits a critical examination of a number of productive distinctions (sexuality, gender, race, nation, class) that shape perceptions of the sources ... queer potentially operates as a third term, beyond the gender/sexuality opposition; compared with categories such as lesbian, gay, or transgender, it is not strongly marked as a category of selfhood, nor is it institutionalized as such (except perhaps within fairly limited academic settings).<sup>4</sup>

In the intervening years the meaning of queer has been evolving and broadening to refer to non-normative identities and politics. In this way, queer includes those who feel that their sex, gender and/or identity do not fit within the mainstream traditional heterocentric and binary paradigms. Queer, avoiding any specific label, now includes gay, lesbian, transgender, gender-fluid, two-spirited, and others. Those who do not have same-sex desires or relationships and those deemed “other” may also self-identify as queer. Importantly queer has, in many ways, become synonymous with the “other.” This modern development and expansion of the meaning of queer makes it a powerful tool for

---

3 There is some analysis of Mediterranean Jews in the essay by Gregory S. Hutcheson. See pp. 191-219.

4 Robert Mills, *Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages* (Chicago, 2015), p. 21. Mills understands, as do we, that using *queer* as a term does have some drawbacks: “queer risks simply becoming a byword in historical research for what previously went under the sign of homosexuality” (p. 21). That being said, the contributions in this volume confirm how *queer* can be used as an “umbrella term.”

the analysis of sex, gender, and identity in the medieval Mediterranean world. For this reason, we have adopted the term queer in this volume.

For years, scholars have quibbled over the rigid binary usage of gay and lesbian, heterosexual and homosexual, as these terms do not fit the reality of sex, gender, and identity in other historical periods. Furthermore, an archaeology of queer subjects cannot be restricted to sex, gender or identity:

Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. 'Queer' then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative.<sup>5</sup>

Here David Halperin points out that queer does not necessarily have a negative connotation. Queer is a signifier for something that is different from the norm, whatever that may be. The modern usage of queer, however, with its broad, ambiguous and non-restrictive meaning, is not bound by the rigidity of the terms previously used to categorize same-sex and heterosexual relationships and desires, and better reflects the multifaceted reality of sexual and other relations and desires in the medieval Mediterranean, as we shall see.

The second theoretical term that we utilize in this collection, transculturalism, refers, in the simplest of terms, to phenomena that involve, encompass, or extend across two or more cultures, whether within or transcending political boundaries. Of course transculturalism as a theoretical mode of analysis is much more complex. In general terms it is a means to find a workable definition of culture by deploying new forms of cultural politics and analysis. Jeff Lewis succinctly characterizes transculturalism and the transcultural critic:<sup>6</sup> in contrast to others, who seem to see transculturalism in a simpler and progressive light and in terms of one culture and globalization, Lewis understands that transculturalism is a complex phenomenon fraught with struggle, tension, animosity, and the possibility of violence and ultimately destruction/reconstruction:

... transculturalism is as interested in dissonance, tension, and instability as it is with the stabilizing effects of social conjunction, communalism and organization ... [it] seeks to illuminate the ways in which social groups interact and experience tension ... [it is] interested in the

5 David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York, 1995), p. 62.

6 See Jeff Lewis, "From Culturalism to Transculturalism," *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 1 (2002), pp. 14–32; pp. 13–16, for a more detailed definition of transculturalism.

disintegration of groups, cultures and power. In other words, transculturalism emphasizes the transitory nature of culture as well as its power to transform.<sup>7</sup>

Lewis' powerful, nuanced, and thought-provoking ideas on transculturalism make it clear that this modern line of analysis, like queer theory, is also well matched to the medieval Mediterranean, a time and place of difference, flux, confrontation, conflict, cultural co-habitation and great change. Yet, how does queerness emerge through transculturalism?

Michel Foucault generalized the Middle Ages as a time when people "organized around the theme of the flesh and the practice of penance, a discourse that was markedly unitary."<sup>8</sup> Foucault argued that this unitary discourse produced queerness through its very sanctions of non-normative acts and identities. The current volume will question this premise in order to put into dialogue commonalities and differences amongst cultures that were intrinsically linked through a body of water. It pushes against Foucault's Eurocentrism by questioning how queerness manifests itself and behaves in the absence of a unitary discourse.<sup>9</sup> In a way, this volume is expanding Foucault's definition of sodomy as "that utterly confused category" to include the different kinds of medieval sexualities.<sup>10</sup> In *Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages*, Robert Mills questions Foucault's assertion to propose that "sodomy is not always *utterly* confused in premodern sources: its alignment with characteristics such as gender, physical appearance, age, religion, ethnicity, and of course sin creates a framework in which the invisible can be rendered visible."<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Mark D. Jordan's *The Invention of Sodomy* contends that "sodomy" will always be a source that causes problems "no matter where or how it is used."<sup>12</sup> As the contributors of this volume argue, both queerness and sexualities become these "confused categories", caused by Mediterranean cultural differences and similarities. The existence of transcultural-queer encounters, relationships, and culture is to be found, in most cases, in literary and prescriptive texts such as legal/religious codes. By their very sanctions of non-normative behaviors they

7 Lewis, "From Culturalism to Transculturalism," p. 14.

8 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1990), p. 33.

9 See Joseph Massoud, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago, 2007) for a critique of Foucault's cultural myopia.

10 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 101.

11 Robert Mills, *Seeing Sodomy*, p. 12 (*emphasis theirs*).

12 Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy* (Chicago, 1997), p. 6.

give evidence of queer and transcultural encounters, which have become a significant source for queer historians.<sup>13</sup> The transcultural queer Mediterranean with regards to sex, identities, genders, and cultures, absent from most mainstream medieval texts, and even from many modern day histories of the medieval Mediterranean, is to be found in all the articles of this collection.

The medieval Mediterranean, in all its transactions, was quintessentially transcultural. In writing on the nature of minority-majority relationships in the Mediterranean, Brian A. Catlos opines that:

By the turn of the first millennium, successive phases of region-wide (or nearly regionwide) hegemonic domination, under the Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, and finally, Muslims, engendered a loose region-wide cultural homogeneity at the top. This grew out of a common religious orientation (scriptural Abrahamic monotheism), a common cultural orientation (Roman, Helleno–Persian, Hebrew), and the currency of meta-ecumenian languages (Arabic, Latin and Greek) among elite groups across the region. Meanwhile, the character of Mediterranean geography, and its implications regarding trade and exchange, engendered a sort of loose hegemony emanating from the bottom, rooted in the currency of common vernaculars, shared social values (regarding gender, slavery, warfare, virtue, and so on), and overlapping folk traditions (as with medicine, magic, and spirituality). The result of all of this was a “mutual intelligibility” that enabled an intense dynamic of exchange, acculturation and innovation of technologies, ideas and beliefs. Moreover, it provided a medium for communication and collaboration between corporate entities of different religio-cultural orientations, and facilitated the emergence of hegemonic entities that bridged religio-cultural divides.<sup>14</sup>

We suggest that queerness resides comfortably in the “loose hegemony” described by Catlos which opposes Foucault’s “unitary discourse.” Medieval Mediterranean queerness resides in the bottom-up and not in the top-down. In other words, it was the common folk who expressed queerness by existing outside of the palace walls and stately houses. They were able to communicate more freely with other cultures despite wars and political oppositions. In essence, through these transcultural exchanges emerged the queer. Yet, one must not forget that those individuals who resided in the upper and

13 See Burshatin and Hutcheson, in this volume.

14 Brian Catlos, “Ethno-Religious Minorities,” in *A Companion to Mediterranean History*, eds. P. Horden and S. Kinoshita (London, 2014), pp. 361–77; p. 373.



middle classes were generally the creators, consumers and benefactors of these exchanges: every rank of society was involved in both queerness and transculturalism to some degree. The articles in *Queering the Medieval Mediterranean* demonstrate this extraordinary transcultural dynamic from the point of view of queer sex, identities, genders, and cultures. It is not the first volume or study to critically look at the medieval and early modern period and attempt to uncover hidden sexualities.<sup>15</sup> It is however unique in its attempt to focus on the Mediterranean Sea as the impetus that put into dialogue queerness and sexuality within the bordering lands that make the Mediterranean a unique aquatic space.<sup>16</sup>

The contributions included in *Queering the Medieval Mediterranean* have on purpose not been divided into separate regional sections. Through the process of putting together the collection, we also debated the idea of arranging each contribution alphabetically to highlight the multicultural crossover of

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15 Josiah Blackmore and Gregory Hutchenson, *Queer Iberia: Sexualities, Cultures, and Crossings from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance* (Durham, 1999); Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz, *Constructing Medieval Sexuality* (Minneapolis, 1997), Martha A. Brożyna, *Gender and Sexuality in the Middle Ages: a Medieval Source Documents Reader* (Jefferson, 2005); and Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History, and Literature* (New York, 1997) are just a few examples of the scholarship in this area for the Middle Ages. There are countless others for other periods, including Kenneth Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Cambridge, 1978); Michael Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (New York, 1996); and Guido Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice* (New York, 1985) which are still useful in understanding Mediterranean same-sex desires and sexualities.

16 The Mediterranean Studies Association has held international conferences since 1998 (only once outside of Europe), and was incorporated after several years of informal existence in 1994. This association is closely linked to the Mediterranean Studies journal published by Pennsylvania State University Press. This peer reviewed journal focuses specifically on an interdisciplinary approach to the Mediterranean and its wider influence, both in and outside of Europe. Other equally important groups in this field include: the Mediterranean Seminar (directed by Sharon Kinoshita and Brian Catlos); the Society for the Medieval Mediterranean (that publishes the journals *Al-Masāq: Journal of the Medieval Mediterranean*, and *Medieval Encounters—Jewish, Christian and Muslim Culture in Confluence and Dialogue*. See <http://www.mediterraneanseminar.org/links> (accessed 2 January 2021) for a comprehensive list of other centers and institutes. In addition, several volumes have come out recently that have significantly added to the Mediterranean corpus: Peregrine Horden and Sharon Kinoshita eds., *A Companion to Mediterranean History* (Oxford, 2014); Brian Catlos and Sharon Kinoshita eds., *Can We Talk Mediterranean: Conversations on an Emerging Field in Medieval and Early Modern Studies* (Cham, Switzerland, 2017); and Yasse Elhariry and Edwige Tamalet Talbayev, *Critically Mediterranean: Temporalities, Aesthetics, and Deployments of a Sea in Crisis* (Cham, Switzerland, 2018).

themes, sexualities, and ideas between them, proof in itself of the existence of dynamic transculturalism in the medieval Mediterranean. Even though this organizational strategy would have seemed to further our intention to erase physical and imaginary boundaries that separated different cultural groups, it was a disorganized way to introduce such an important and current subject. We have, therefore, divided the volume into five sections keeping in mind that each contribution, just like the Mediterranean Sea, may touch and complement different areas of the volume. The purpose of these divisions is to set essays in dialogue with one other, in some cases from opposite sides of the Mediterranean.<sup>17</sup>

We open this collection with “Conquests.” The texts studied in this section correspond to two major cultural shifts: Islamic expansion into the Mediterranean in the seventh century and Iberian expansion away from the Mediterranean and toward the Americas in the sixteenth century. They thus mark the chronological beginning and end of the medieval Mediterranean. In this part, Denise K. Filios explores the gender norms that inform the contrasting portrayals of Mūsā b. Nuṣayr (c. 640–717), the conqueror of al-Andalus, by two historians: the Andalusī Ibn Ḥabīb and the Egyptian Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam. The author argues that both historians use Mūsā as a figure of memory whose personal qualities symbolize those of the space he is most associated with: al-Andalus. She observes however, that they diverge in their judgment of Mūsā’s character, and both highlight the challenges he, his sons, and the territory they conquered, present to the normative hierarchy as promoted by centralized authorities. As such, the two depictions of Mūsā expose al-Andalus as a queer space where normative binaries converge. By doing so, they contribute to a discourse of Andalusian exceptionalism that continues to infuse popular, scholarly, and Mediterranean discussions of “Muslim Spain.” We remain in the Iberian Peninsula for the second essay in this section as Vicente Lledó-Guillem marks the chronological close of the medieval Mediterranean. Lledó-Guillem compares Cristóbal de Virués sixteenth-century epic poem *El Monserrate*, with Homer’s *Odyssey*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and Joanot Martorell and Martí Joan de Galba’s *Tirant lo Blanc*. His comparison concerns the representation political implications of the representation of the masculine body in the Mediterranean and the same-sex male desire that it engenders. On the one hand, Lledó-Guillem sees Virués’ Castilian hero as a continuation of the ideal of physical

17 Each pairing is intended to set the pieces in dialogue within a thematic frame, but other frames are possible: Rouhi and Hayes both study the figure of the go-between; Friedrich and Sturges both read canonical works of medieval French literature; and Burshatin and Hutcheson tackle the *Siete Partidas*.

virility that can be traced back to Classical epic poetry. On the other hand, the author shows that when this culturally constructed myth of masculinity supports the natural superiority and legitimacy of Castilian dominant political power in the Mediterranean. While this natural Castilian preeminence is based on male strength and beauty in *El Monserrate*, the Castilian superiority to the male hero in *Tirant* responds to a rejection of same-sex male desire from the Muslim “other.”

The next section of the collection tackles “Femininities.” In the first essay here, Sahar Amer exposes the erasure of the cultural, literary, and political influence of women in the Muslim Mediterranean world. Amer shows that these women, labeled as “bad girls” in later centuries, introduced political and gender instability by “queering” political, social, and gender norms. Shajarat al-Durr, a thirteenth-century sultaness of Egypt, is the central figure in her study, and lived in a period of major political instability, a turning point in the history of the Mediterranean for both Europe and the Islamicate world. The author emphasizes how the important role that this sultaness played during and after her reign has been omitted or downplayed by historians to this day. The second essay of this section merges the Muslim and Spanish worlds of the medieval Iberian Peninsula. Leyla Rouhi’s article centers on the figure of the *alcahueta*, the go-between who facilitated illicit sexual encounters, among other things. The author argues that this archetype was placed in an unstable situation due to her social inferiority and her line of work. Hence, this perilous position in society places the *alcahueta* within a queer framework, in the sense of being at odds with the normal, the legitimate, and the dominant. Rouhi’s study, while focused on Juan Ruiz’s fourteenth-century character Trotaconventos and on Fernando de Rojas’ late fifteenth-century *Celestina*, also discusses the uncanny resemblance of the Spanish *alcahueta* to certain portrayals in Islamicate literatures of the Classical period. This work thus gives the highly studied figure of the go-between a Mediterranean treatment, reaching across the sea and across history in order to do so.

In the following section, “Literatures,” Edmund Hayes again studies the go-between, but as a construction of a text’s complex linguistic virtuosity. Hayes shifts the focus to Egypt as he examines Ibn Dāniyāl’s irrepressibly explicit shadow play, *Ṭayf al-Khayāl* (*Vision of the Beloved*), a florid, complex work of linguistic virtuosity produced in thirteenth-/fourteenth-century Mamluk Cairo. Hayes’ reading of the play, both as literary text and as social artifact, shows that it was designed to instigate interaction with its audience, and thus perforate the boundaries between licit and illicit, both confirming and questioning the integrity of these boundaries. In particular, the chapter investigates the play’s depiction of the dangers of lesbianism and female power through

an analysis of the ironically named matchmaker and madam, Umm Rashīd (Mother Guidance), an ebullient grotesque who is simultaneously humorous and horrific. Hayes' and Rouhi's articles demonstrate how the topos of the go-between can and should be studied through the lens of the Mediterranean, and how we should put these literary manifestations into dialogue. Ellen Lorraine Friedrich then further opens up the Mediterranean discussion as she examines in detail the underlying semantic meaning of an erotically charged phallic lexicon used in Old French and other languages. Her in-depth analysis includes the examination of numerous texts from various languages to support and reinforce her queer reading of the *Roman de la rose*, showing a common transcultural queer/sexual usage of words, names, colors, themes, and images, especially that of the flamboyant bird.

"Captivities" explores captivity as a privileged space for negotiations with the queer. In his analysis of the French carnivalesque *Aucassin et Nicolette*, written in the northern French Picard dialect, Robert S. Sturges shows how this *chanteable* uses an invented Mediterranean geography to confront, through displacement, northern French anxieties about the complex interplay between Islam and Christianity, heresy and orthodoxy, and ultimately Mediterranean queerness: the similarities between Muslims and heretics. What Sturges demonstrates is that this *chanteable* presents Christian perceptions, and exposes high medieval fears of the otherness/queerness normally represented by the southern Mediterranean, and which might exist within oneself. Next, we return to medieval Christian Spain as Israel Burshatin centers his study on Alfonso X of Castile's *Segunda Partida*, which covers the problematic legal situation of captives within a frontier society in crisis. With regards to those obliged to seek the freedom of these captives, the author considers the ambiguous fifth grouping "por amor de voluntad" as a way in which queerness may emerge. Through Burshatin's use of Mediterranean theories, like the practice of *affrèment* in *ancien régime* France and the ideas of Eduardo de Hinojosa, he suggests that this "love of benevolence" / "disinterested love" / "freely given love" allows for a homosocial and a tentative queer reading of the nature of these "friendships."

The final section of the collection, "Encounters," opens by continuing the discussion of the *Segunda Partida*. Gregory S. Hutcheson argues that the thirteenth-century Castilian law code, although derivative of the Roman *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, is equally informed by a cross-confessional textuality inherent in much of the Castilian intellectual activity of the period. Through a close reading of *Partida* 7.21 ("Concerning Those Who Commit the Sin of Licentiousness Against Nature"), he traces complex intertextualities with Jewish and Muslim sources that not only suggest the intelligibility of the *pecado sodomítico* across

the Mediterranean, but also potentially open up passageways for queer subjects to move across cultural and confessional borders. We close the collection with Robert L.A. Clark's article which focuses on particular scenes from the *Kitab al-P'tibar* (*Book of Contemplation*) written by the Arab-Syrian amir and man of letters Usama Ibn Munqih (1095–1118), who dedicated several pages to the “wonders” of the Frankish Race. His contact with cultures like the Franks puts southern and northern Mediterranean civilization into dialogue in ways similar to the previous contribution. Most important to Clark's study are two bathhouse scenes where Muslim and Frankish men and women mingle in ways and manners that may be construed as queer. For the author in both cases the situation of the bathhouse, at the crossroads of intra- and intercultural, if not homoerotic exchange, has “a touch of the queer.” Whereas Hutcheson studies the top-down imposition of hegemonic norms through the legal/moral codes, Clark explores the bottom-up “loose hegemony” that emerges from encounters among cultural groups in the bathhouses. In this way both contributions serve as a perfect close to the volume.

*Queering the Medieval Mediterranean* aims to problematize the differences between each bordering landmass in order to argue that through both queerness and sexuality, neighboring civilizations had access to, and knowledge of, common shared experiences. This collection is the beginning of what we hope will be a burgeoning area of study: there is more work to be done with regards to queerness and sexuality within cultures connected by the Mediterranean. This collection does not contain contributions that discuss the Italian city-states, Greece or its northern neighbors, for example, nor many of the civilizations of the Middle East and North Africa. What we have tried to accomplish here then is to begin forming the bits and pieces of a wider dialogue between societies, cultures, and civilizations of the medieval Mediterranean, through sexualities. One volume cannot do justice to the richness of this world, and our focus on literature will ideally lead others to look at different disciplines and take up the mantle, focusing not only on sexualities and queerness, but on other fields that may uncover new and intriguing inner workings that were present because of the intersection brought by the Mediterranean Sea.

We began our study by posing the question: does Adnan Husain's “alternate sort of history of the Mediterranean” also include queer culture? This volume argues that it should definitely embrace it.

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# The Transcultural Medieval Mediterranean

*Felipe E. Rojas and Peter E. Thompson*

Adnan Husain artfully sets the medieval and early modern Mediterranean in a historiographical context and declares that “by recognizing the region as both a space of encounter and a cultural unity forged in different ways at different times with eventful consequences, an alternative sort of history of the Mediterranean [would be] possible.”<sup>1</sup> To create this history, Husain urges us to embrace the “religious cultures and their shared histories” at the same time as form “the historical narratives to represent these histories.” By doing so, he argues, we will not diminish conflicting traditions or identities that are fundamental to Mediterranean civilizations but acknowledge that these characteristics were also intertwined with “periods of cooperation, interchange, connection, synthesis, and symbiosis.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, the Mediterranean flourished through a fine balance between periods of antagonism and friendliness. *Queering the Medieval Mediterranean* begs the question: does the “alternate” sort of history of the Mediterranean proposed by Husain also include queer culture and identity?

Considering the number of peoples that encompassed the medieval Mediterranean, we have chosen to focus *Queering the Medieval Mediterranean: A Transcultural Sea of Sex, Gender, Identity, and Culture* on specific Christian-Muslim interactions. In part, this is a reflection of the expertise of the collaborators but it is also a measure of practicality. It would be difficult to tackle a study of the whole of the Mediterranean in one collection. Since the battle for power and influence in the Mediterranean during the medieval period was greatest between Christian and Islamic groups and empires, this has become our focus, although not all Christian-Muslim regions have been included. This is once again a reflection of the immense number of possible cases for analysis and the need to delineate the parameters of this collection. This does not mean that we fail to understand the importance of the influence, history, and

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1 Adnan Husain, “Introduction: Approaching Islam and the Religious Cultures of Medieval and Early Modern Mediterranean,” in *A Faithful Sea: the Religious Cultures of the Mediterranean, 1200–1700*, eds. Adnan Husain and Katherine E. Fleming (Oxford, 2007), pp. 1–26; p. 23.

2 Adnan Husain, “Introduction,” p. 23.

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